

Learning from life's lessons

Local teacher channels experiences into short story collection

FOXBORO — Michael Atwood, an English teacher, cross country and track coach at Foxboro High School, has published a collection of thematically linked short stories, "HiStory of Santa Monica," available this month from Aqueous Books.

Atwood, a North Attleboro native, is no stranger to writing; in fact, his

life appears to have been shaped by the written word.

After graduating from Boston College with a degree in English, Atwood taught in local schools for several years before leaving

Massachusetts for California. There, he earned a master's degree in professional writing from the University of Southern California, where he focused his studies on fiction and screenwriting.

He started writing this collection of short stories in the fall of 2002 while living in a small apartment next to a Mexican restaurant with his wife, Melanie, in Santa Monica and attending classes.

"This was my first year off from working since college — nine years

of teaching, coaching, and trying to find time to write. I usually wrote every morning in that old apartment then took time to run or wander Santa Monica and learn about this new town 3,000 miles from home," he told *The Sun Chronicle*.

After studying screenwriting, drama, fiction, technical writing, non-fiction, and comedy writing, he tested himself by writing scripts for Hollywood.

He happened to meet George Wendt, who rose to fame as Norm on "Cheers," while teaching Wendt's son, Joe, at a Los Angeles area high school. After asking if his dad would read a script, Atwood received a call from Wendt, who invited him to his Studio City home to discuss the business and later became a mentor figure to Atwood.

While the Hollywood thing never worked out, Atwood took one of the lessons he learned while out there and channeled it into "HiStory of Santa Monica."

"I arrived in L.A. as a teacher, who wanted to become a screenwriter. I left as a failed writer and a new father," he said. "While in Hollywood, I met many memorable individuals, but I mostly just observed people failing. I think stories of failure can be as interesting as those with success."

"HiStory of Santa Monica" tells

stories of death, life and failure linked by place. The book opens with a story about a young man returning home for his uncle's funeral — a fictional story with true roots in Atwood's life. He carries the same character through to the end of the book when the character serves as the godfather at his nephew's baptism.

"In between are tales of struggle and the failure to realize dreams in Hollywood but also with identity," Atwood said.

He reports that family and ritual are consistent motifs through the stories — including "Windmills," a story about a young couple looking for their dream home in Palm Springs, and "The Shebeen," a story set in the 20s about an Irish-American who encounters issues of family and loyalty after relocating to Santa Monica from Boston.

Atwood returned to Massachusetts in 2005, teaching in Easton, then moving to Foxboro High School in 2008 when the head track and cross country jobs and a full-time English teaching job opened.

"I turned to writing short stories that summer and published my first story 'Ancient Hibernians' by January 2009. Four more were published by May," he said.

Learn more about Atwood on his website, mjatwood.com.

—JESSICA KOSOWSKI

